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ABSTRACT

"Bunko" are local mini-libraries for children in Japan, operated voluntarily by individuals or groups of parents, intended to nurture children's reading interest by offering them an inviting reading environment. In 1993, there were an estimated 4,000 bunko in Japan, with approximately 32,000 adult bunko members (90% female). Bunko members cooperate with other bunko and public librarians to exchange experiences, study children's books, and promote the development of local children's reading interests. More than 80% of bunko do not charge any membership fee for child members. Individual bunko collections vary from less than 100 books to more than 3,000 books. To encourage children to read, adult bunko members carefully select books for the bunko by considering the content of the books and children's reading interests; read aloud; conduct book talks; tell stories; display books; and have children and adults take turns reading to each other. The joy of reading is shared indirectly by other activities: storyboard theater, origami, top making, puppet shows, and outdoor activities. Problems at bunko include finding a location for the bunko, finding good volunteers, lack of funding for book purchases and other activities, a decreasing number of child members due to a declining birth rate, demands on children to prepare for school entrance examinations, a change in children's reading tastes, and the unsympathetic attitudes of local people and authorities who feel that developing literacy is best left to formal education. Two lists of guidelines for and benefits of "Sharing the Joys of Reading by Parents and Children," and a table of facts on Japan, Japanese schools and libraries are provided. (SWC)

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Bunko: Private Mini-Libraries for Children in Japan

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1. WHAT IS A BUNKO?

1.1 A Private Mini-library for Children

In Japan, there has been a nationwide parents' volunteer activity since the late 1960s called the *"Bunko"*. A bunko is a local mini-library for children operated voluntarily by a private individual, or a group of parents, to nurture children's reading interest by offering them an inviting reading environment. The total number of bunko in Japan in 1993 is estimated to be about 4,000, from a survey conducted by librarians including the present writer.

1.2 Adult Bunko Member(s)

The total number of adult bunko members is estimated to be about 32,000, with 90% female. The largest age groups are the thirties (43.5%) and forties (31.8%). Most adult members are mothers whose children have grown up, leaving them free time to volunteer. Adult members share such characteristics as: (1) they love reading, especially children's books, (2) they regard the lifelong reading habit as a good means to build children's personal character, and (3) they want to share the joys of reading not only with their own children but also with other children in the community. Moreover, bunko members are motivated by the following social phenomena: (1) children's declining interest in reading, (2) people's increasing focus on seeking success in material terms, which tends to reduce interests in the beauty in human nature and in the natural environment, and (3) a strong emphasis on school education oriented toward preparation for entrance examinations for higher education. Adult bunko members felt that they had to do something for their children and for the community, and so they opened a bunko or joined bunko activities.

The bunko opens at least once a week, and each bunko group gets together at least once a month to discuss the operation of their bunko. Groups cooperate with other bunko to exchange experiences, study children's books, and promote the development of local children's reading interests. Public librarians also often cooperate with the bunko members. Where there is no public library service, the local bunko strongly advocates developing the service to the local authorities. Quite a few bunko have succeeded in having new libraries established and in developing substantial library services.

1.3 Child Bunko Members

Children of the community come to the bunko and register themselves as its members. More than 80% of bunko do not charge any membership fee; if any, the fee is nominal. Membership allows the child to borrow books and to participate in regular and occasional bunko activities.

Among the child members, the largest age group is 1-2 graders, followed by 3-4 graders, 4-6 year olds, 5-6 graders, and 0-3 year olds, in declining order. The ratio of male to female is 3:7. From secondary school (seventh grade) on, most children stop coming to the bunko. However, a few do come occasionally to read books, and talk with the adult members. In general, children say that they feel free from various pressures in the bunko, that it is "the healing place of their soul".

1.4 Bunko Holdings

The total number of volumes held varies among bunko. Smaller bunko may have fewer than 100 books, while the largest collections may exceed 3,000. Individually operated bunko are usually based in a home, while group-operated bunko may be housed in a local meeting place, a kindergarten, a religious institution, etc. Some bunko have used retired and remodeled buses or trains, which children love. The larger the collection becomes, the harder it is to find a place for the bunko.

2. ACTIVITIES OF BUNKO TO ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO READ

2.1 Book Selection

The most important activity to promote reading is book selection. In Japan, around 2,900 titles of children's books are published each year. Adult members carefully examine the quality of books, considering the children's

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interests in reading and their budget. The local public library also lends books out to the bunko, and the number of books and the length of the lending period ranges from twenty books for several weeks to six hundred for a three month period. These books are selected by adult bunko members.

Selecting books offers a good chance for the adults to study the contents of books, authors, book publishing and marketing, and their children's reading interests. Local librarians offer assistance in book selection and information about books and readers. Adults, in turn, offer to young librarians their knowledge, experience, and way of thinking as parents who read books together with children throughout their growth.

2.2 Direct Ways of Sharing the Joys of Reading

Reading aloud, book talk, storytelling and displaying books are used to encourage children to read. Moreover, many bunko have adopted the method of "Reading Books by Parents and Children Together". Mother and child take turns reading. The practice works best if done at a designated time daily, e.g., before bed time or after dinner, etc., and if done constantly and continuously. (*Cf.*, "Guidelines" and "Benefits" by Shogo Saitoh)

Reading aloud is felt by many to be beneficial from shortly after the birth of a baby. A bunko mother reported that she began reading aloud to her baby within six weeks of her birth. She was deeply moved when the baby responded willingly to the reading aloud after four weeks of practice. In another example, a professor of psychology observed the growth of her child, and reported that when her child was one year and eleven months old, she already had her favorite book to listen to. When she was three years and two months old, she began to read some of the Japanese letters aloud. At the age of four years and five months, she began to write these letters on her own. At the age of four years and nine months, she began to show keen interest in reading to her mother. From our observations in bunko activities, such cases are not unusual.

Many Japanese children can read Japanese books by the time they are three or four years old. This is because Japanese books for ages up to five are mostly written in letters that consist of simple, cursive lines, that are easy to identify. The letters are phonetic symbols, combining a consonant and a vowel. Learning these letters is not difficult for any infant who has had chances to listen to their parents' reading aloud, to see the Japanese letters repeatedly, to see their parents' interest in reading, and especially to have been thoughtfully taken care of and nurtured in their interest in combining a concept, an object and the letters.

2.3 Indirect Ways of Sharing the Joys of Reading

Psychologists say that: (1) children's intelligence can be developed by their own motivation to learn, (2) their learning can be promoted by their own curiosity, and (3) their active learning can be developed as far as their willingness to learn. In order to develop children's interests in reading, therefore, adult bunko members try to encourage children's motivation to learn, to awaken their curiosity, and to make the bunko a pleasant place to come to. Indirect ways of sharing the joys of reading are planned to achieve these goals. They include: storyboard theater, origami, the traditional Japanese art of folding paper, top making, etc., puppet shows, and such outdoor activities as hiking, field trips, camping, observing stars, cooking out, etc.

2.4 Various Activities Supporting a Bunko

The most fundamental support activity of the bunko is the adult members' study meeting. Among the variou topics, book selection is the most important. The group also studies tec -hniques of reading aloud, book talks, and storytelling. In addition, they discuss the local library policies, comparing them with those of other localities. Through these activities, the adults learn a lot about the community and think about their roles as citizens.

Editing and publishing newsletters, proceedings, collections of essays and book reports are done in many bunko, and have worked effectively to exchange and disseminate information among the bunko members in and out of the community. Forming a liaison committee from neighboring bunko, and attending national bunko meetings also give good chances to exchange experiences, study children's books, promote children's reading interests, and develop mutual understanding and cooperation among bunko members.

3. REWARDS, PROBLEMS, AND THE FUTURE

3.1 Rewards from Bunko Members, Community and Librarian

Adult bunko members are volunteers, giving their own time, money and labor for the development of better environment for children. Their rewards are simple self-satisfaction. However, they are also encouraged by: (1) positive reactions from present and former child and adult members, (2) reactions of local people who acknowledge the efforts of the bunko, understanding that the bunko is a place to unite children and books, and (3) recognition of their activities and cooperation by local librarians.

3.2 Problems

Every bunko has many problems. It is not easy to find a suitable place to house many books, and to find good volunteers to carry on the work. Bunko have been troubled by the paucity of funds to buy books and to purse various activities. Moreover, the most difficult problems in present day bunko are: (1) a decreasing number of child members, because of the declining birth rate, and the demands on children to prepare for their high school and college entrance examinations, (2) drastic changes in the children's reading tastes, because of the changing values in the society, and (3) unsympathetic attitudes of local people and authorities who feel that developing literacy is an important role best left to formal education, and that private individuals concerned about children's reading are perhaps political radicals.

3.3 The Future

Although their activities have not been easy to maintain, it is clear that bunko have offered various chances for development to their child members and have provided them a "healing place of the soul". Such benefits are hard to quantify, and so it is sometimes very difficult to get social recognition. Nevertheless, bunko will continue to influence the reading habits of not only the next generation, but succeeding ones as well, as children themselves become parents and pass on their habits and love of reading to their own children. The seeds are sown for a rich harvest to be gathered by the next and future generations.

Guidelines for "Sharing the Joys of Reading by Parents and Children"[1]

Shogo Saitoh
1970

1. The object is share the joys of reading, not to persuade the children to read.
2. The reading ability of children will surely bedeveloped by these practices.
3. The children learn how deeply the parents are moved by reading.
4. Books should not be used for moralizing or lecturing.
5. Parents should not impatiently ask a child's impressions of a book.
6. In selecting books to read, attention should be paid to choosing "the right book for the right reader at the right time."
7. The father's participation is, of course, welcome.
8. Knowledge acquired from reading should be assimilated by comparisons with reality and practical situation.
9. Each family member should have personal favorite books.
10. Every home should have a family library.

Supplement: Reading aloud should be done with the readers' whole heart, and without hurry.

Benefits of "Sharing the Joys of Reading by Parents and Children"

Shogo Saitoh

1. It produces lively and congenial conversation between parents and children.
2. It opens windows to the minds of parents and children.
3. It helps to enhance the joys of reading.
4. It enables everyone to find personal favorite books of good quality.
5. It develops the habit of reading.
6. It develops language sensitivity.
7. It helps children to understand their parents' thinking.
8. It reveals to the parents the growing minds of the children.
9. It reveals the attractive character of the parents.
10. It helps to develop a better reading environment in the home and in the community.

FACTS ON JAPAN, JAPANESE SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES

Area 377,727 Square km/145,803 Square miles
(State of California 158,693 Square miles)

Population 124,093,000 in 1991 (U.S.A. 249,000,000 in 1990)

Education[2]

	Schools	Students	Teachers
K	15,041	1,977,611	101,493
1-6	24,793	9,157,429	444,903
7-9	11,290	5,188,314	286,965
10-12	5,503	5,454,929	286,092

School Libraries[3]

	Ratio of Establishment	Volumes Average	Volumes per student
1-6	99.7%	5,811	14.6
7-9	99.4%	6,495	12.5
10-12	99.4%	18,240	18.1

School Library Staff[4]

	Average No. of Teachers in Charge of School Lib.	Ratio of Staff Placement Certificated Librarian	Teacher Librarian
1-6	2	18.5%	0.3%
7-9	1.9	20.9%	0.5%
10-12	3.77	85.1%	0.7%

Public Libraries[5]

Total Number		2,038 (plus 651 Bookmobiles)
Staff		
	Certificated	7,323
	Non-certificated	6,994
		Total 14,317
	Part-time	3,714
Volumes	185,232,000	
Books Circulated		292,244,000
(Books for Children)		105,200,000

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[1] A movement in Japan that advocates the practice of reading aloud to one another. This practice is recommended to be done regularly every day before bed time, after dinner, or at some other convenient times.

[2] Japan Statistical Yearbook, 1992

[3] School Library White Paper, 2, 1990. Japan School Library Association

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Library Yearbook, 1993. Japan Library Association